

Bottle ban means business

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RALEIGH — No, the trash police aren't on the way to your house. But on Oct. 1, it will be illegal for plastic bottles to find their way into North Carolina landfills.

In theory, that ban will help more of the 288 million pounds of soda containers, milk jugs and detergent bottles Tar Heels toss out every year find their way to recycling centers, say officials with the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

And the reason for the new law has as much to do with saving jobs as it does saving the planet, experts say.

North Carolinians throw away roughly four of every five bottles, said Scott Mouw, with the Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance.

At the same time, the state is already home to companies that recycle plastics such as Envision Plastics and Plastic Revolutions, both in Reidsville. And a huge new recycling plant near Fayetteville will use up to 280 million pounds of the stuff every year, Mouw said.

"There are some pretty important economic benefits for us not to be throwing this stuff away," Mouw said. "For us, as North Carolinians to create jobs just by throwing a bottle in the right direction is really significant."

Chinese companies are major buyers of plastic bottles from the United States, gobbling up as many as half of the recycled bottles available, Mouw said.

Keeping bottles out of landfills here should increase supplies of recycled bottles available to be turned into items such as more bottles, carpet and pricey outerwear.

"The more people who engage in recycling plastics, the more that's going to help companies like Unifi take advantage of a cost-competitive product," said Roger Berrier, an executive vice president with the Greensboro-based textile maker.

The company's Repreve product line started as an effort to recycle its own polyester leftovers and then expanded into using recycled plastic bottles. It can be found in items such as reusable grocery bags, affordable clothing made for Walmart and high-end outdoor wear like that made by Patagonia.

The New York City transit system is also a customer.



Nelson Kepley

Recyclable materials are sorted into groups such as this large pile of plastic bottles at the FCR recycling facility in Greensboro. On Oct. 1, it will be illegal for plastic bottles to find their way into North Carolina landfills.

Worth noting

The bottle ban is not the only one taking effect Oct. 1. Oil filters and wooden pallets will be banned that day as well. As with plastic bottles, both of those items have become commodities in demand by recyclers. And there are a host of banned items that people sometimes forget about. For example, aluminum cans are supposed to have been kept out of landfills since the 1990s.

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"They wanted a more environmentally conscious seating fabric," Berrier said.

But before those seats can be environmentally conscious, consumers need to be conscious of the new rules.

"There are only a limited number of us, so we're obviously aren't going to be on any kind of patrol — that's a ridiculous notion," said Paul Crissman, chief of DENR's solid-waste section.

Individuals don't need to worry about getting a fine for a stray bottle. State inspectors pretty much only deal with landfills and trash haulers.

And as with other environmental rules that have been put in place, Crissman said the state will emphasize education and information over enforcement. State inspectors, he said, will periodically check for banned materials at landfills or trash-transfer stations, he said, and landfills carry out their own checks.

Although fines are in the offing for flagrant violators, "most people want to do the right thing, it's more of an information problem."

Already, he said, trash haulers and landfills have been sending notices to their customers about the bottle ban.

Besides changing household habits, state officials say they need to reach out to businesses and other groups that have their trash hauled away.

For example, ballparks and college campuses produce a lot of bottles, Mouw said.

"If we got every bottle of every house, we might get up to something like 44 percent of all those produced in the state," Mouw said.

According to a state report, Orange County recycled the most plastic of any of the state's 100 counties, recovering 29.42 pounds per resident in the 2008 fiscal year.

Guilford County has the seventh-highest per-capita recycling rate, recovering 8.4 pounds per resident over the course of a year. Rockingham County is in the bottom half of the list with 1.25 pounds per person recovered over the course of the year.

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